

the wonderful part of the mess that we made by carrythesky

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Summary:

Jonathan's not sure, but he thinks he might be dating Steve Harrington and Nancy Wheeler.

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Author's Note:

Prompt: We were pretending to be lovers but I'm not pretending anymore and I have to know if you feel the same way.

"Creepy tree, ten o'clock," says Nancy.

Standing a short distance away, Jonathan narrows his eyes slightly. "You sure?" he asks. "I thought we were further in—"

"I'm sure." He watches Nancy's hands ball into fists at her sides, and his own fingers twitch reflexively against his pockets, a nervous staccato to match his stuttering heartbeat. It's been six months, half a year since Will came home, but this place still has its hooks in him, still dredges up dark memories and echoes of adrenaline-laced terror, pure and primal and real. He knows Nancy is feeling it too, but as always the fear seems to bolster her strength instead of diminishing it—he sees it her clenched jaw, the ferocity of her gaze as she appraises the expanse of forest before them—

—and a younger Nancy blazes to the forefront of his mind, tilting her head as she squints one eye shut and levels her handgun at the line of cans in the distance. Gone are the pseudo-suburban, cookie cutter qualities he's assigned to her over the years he's known her—every inch of the girl standing next to him is confidence and tenacity and all the things he's convinced himself she's not. *Yeah*, she grits out, voice as steady as her finger against the trigger. *Screw that* -

"I'm starting to think," a voice rings about behind him, jolting him sharply back to the present, "that you guys are trying to ditch me in

this scary-ass forest.”

Jonathan’s lips twist wryly; he catches Nancy’s glance as they both turn to face Steve Harrington.

He resents it at first, how easily everything goes back to being normal. If living in Hawkins, Indiana for the past seventeen years has taught him anything, it’s that people have short attention spans when it comes to problems that aren’t their own. Even so, as the weeks pass and the town quietly moves past Will Byers’ disappearance, bitterness begins to fester within him like a splinter lodged too deep. *It’s not fair*, his thoughts loop on repeat as he lays awake, shuddering from yet another nightmare that has torn him from sleep. *It’s not fair that they can forget*. On nights like these, he wonders how it’s possible, how any of them can move on with their lives and pretend that the world isn’t made of shadow and ash and monsters that invade the spaces between.

On nights like these, the scar on his palm *burns*.

He’s always been adept at isolating himself, retreating into survival mode, so no one is more surprised than he is when, three weeks into the spring semester, Nancy and Steve start asking him if he wants to hang out.

What surprises him even more is that he says yes.

Steve is looking at him now, and Jonathan doesn't miss how his eyes linger on his face a half-second longer than usual. He wonders if he'll ever get used to this, exchanging charged, fleeting glances with Steve *fucking* Harrington, and his pulse skips in a not-so-unpleasant way.

"So, explain this to me again," Steve says, shifting his gaze towards Nancy. "The upside down was, like, *in* the tree?"

Nancy's smile is all teeth. "I know for a fact you've gone over this with Mike already. He knows more about it than I do, anyways."

"Yeah, well, I have to keep up with you two somehow." Steve moves to kneel an arm's-length away from the tree in question, gently squeezing both Jonathan and Nancy's hands as he brushes past them.

"Steve Harrington admitting he doesn't know everything?" Nancy snarks, crouching beside him, and Jonathan can't help the way his eyes ricochet between the two teens, absorbing the tilts and twists of their lips as their banter sparks like lightning in the midsummer air. This—*flirting*—is the part he's never been good at, but somehow it's not awkward with Nancy and Steve. The three of them *fit*, weirdly and wonderfully - it's easier with them, and something that feels very much like happiness settles comfortably in Jonathan's stomach at the thought. It's the best he's felt since his brother came home.

Jonathan's not sure, but he thinks, he *thinks* he might be dating Steve Harrington and Nancy Wheeler.

It's the week before summer vacation, and the three of them are standing in Jonathan's living room in varying stages of discomfort. He knows his ability to read social cues leaves something to be desired—he hadn't been exaggerating that day in the darkroom when he'd told Nancy he's rather observe people than, *you know...*—but even he can tell that her eyes are a little too bright as they flick between him and Steve, fingers fluttering nervously at her sides.

"And you guys thought this was going to be awkward," he blurts into the silence.

Nancy huffs a laugh, grins and ducks her head, and the tension in the room abates slightly. "I'm sorry, guys. The last thing I want is for either of you to feel uncomfortable. I'm just...I'm tired of pretending that *this*"—she gestures between the three of them—"isn't something. Because it is."

Jonathan's heart catapults over his ribcage and into his throat. "People will talk."

"So let them." Nancy pauses a moment, then says, soft and low, "We all know stranger things have happened in this town."

Jonathan turns his gaze to Steve, who looks slightly more relaxed as he leans against the wall, arms folded across his chest, eyes fixed firmly on the floor. Something that could almost be considered a smile is tugging at his lips, one of his signature Harrington half-

smirks that would have once made Jonathan feel nauseous; now, warmth blossoms in the pit of his stomach at the sight.

“Are you okay with this?” he asks, and Steve glances up at him sharply. The half-smirk curves into a real, genuine smile, and Jonathan’s fingers itch for his Pentax.

“Yeah, Byers,” he says. “I’m alright. I mean, your taste in music is slightly questionable, but we can work on that.”

Jonathan realizes in this moment that he’s never actually looked at Harrington—he’d learned to keep his eyes focused anywhere, everywhere else during encounters with the social elite of Hawkins High, and those memories blur behind his eyes now, linoleum floors and a chorus of locker doors slamming shut and the harsh, biting laughter of his peers. Every impulse within him screams to look away, curl in on himself where it’s safe, but this time he holds Steve’s gaze, refusing to cave or so much as even blink—

—and he’s momentarily stunned by how...*soft* Steve’s face actually is, all contours and curves, eyes shining like topaz in the arc of light slanting across his cheekbones, warm and open and kind -

Stranger things, indeed.

“So, this is—” Jonathan croaks, swallows past the tightness in his throat. “I mean...we’re—”

Steve's teeth flash as he grins and runs a hand through his mop of hair. "For better or worse, man. You're stuck with us."

Nancy is at Jonathan's side, fingers threading through his before he can respond, and his eyes dart towards her face again, drinking in the mosaic of expressions on her face - hope, acceptance, *love*.

"You're an idiot, Jonathan Byers," she says, and her smile is sunlight.